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SPECIAL ARTICLES

ART AN ESSENTIAL OF SOCIAL REFORM

BY OWEN R. WASHBURN

ART brings a sword. Beauty housed in temples, by home fires and on broad avenues, soothes man's unquiet moments, rests him after toil, comforts him for sorrows, strengthens him for conflicts and day by day increases his power to see and ability to feel, until at last he will no longer bear with patience the established infamies. Appreciation of art, like a superior strain of blood in the race, brings democracies and freedom.

An advanced civilization is an artistic stage of culture. Man rests for a while when he has obtained food and a warm bed for every night, but leisure increases the better emotions and emotions touched by art become the fountains of better actions. From this source all improvements flow.

It is proverbial that the ballads of a people determine their conduct more than their laws, yet ballads are but representatives of art. Oratory, the most ancient of the arts, precedes mass movements in any population. Given the assistance of the eight arts, and the loftier impulses of any race bloom in lofty governments, justice and the abolition of cruelties and tyrannies. The eager thirst for blood of tyrants which has characterized the Greeks and Romans and other art-loving peoples arises from the passion for truth which the tyrants have turned aside and allowed to accumulate like imprisoned waters. It is not for lost nationalism that the subjugated people mourn but for the lost opportunities for manifestation of the soul. The misgovernments which make poverty for the common people are resisted, not for the sake of money but for the defense of the larger need of expression. The failure of Socialism and of many a popular movement in this country resulted from the mistaken policy by which leaders have appealed to the economic interests and scorned art as a pastime of the rich. Had the great emotions of our people been stirred; had the world of toiling poor been aroused to an idealism that would have counted great works of art a part of the eternal wealth of mankind and expression of the loftier selves, the highest need of the masses, most of the worst social ills would have vanished from America, and in Europe the millions would not have engaged in relentless war.

Moses understood the common people when he made for their unschooled eyes a beautiful "Ark of the Covenant" and put about it mystery and wonder. Not unskillfully of old did the writers picture God as coming to the mountain top clothed with clouds and fire, with storm and thunders about him, to write upon the stone tablets the ten commandments. The Law of the Hebrews forbade plastic art, yet literary art was the chief manifestation of an artistic impulse which changed wandering tribes from desert-living to a per-

manent portion of the world's great powers. The exultant psalms, the lofty prophesyings, the passionate Song of Songs, the drama of Job, the beauty of Solomon's Temple were expressions of art impulses which, age by age as they were produced, marked the power of Israel to understand superior things. Without these the desert and the Jordan would today fail to remind men that Israel made bricks without straw when Moses planned and Aaron mastered by his oratorical art a king of Egypt. It was their artistic ideals and the accompanying sense of unity and truth which gave Judas Maccabæus inspiration for his heroic fighting and his people endurance through long centuries of oppression, torture and robbery.

Israel arose through her art impulses. Egypt her task-master kept from age to age a conventionalized and unprogressive art and thus had no revolutions, uplifts or popular movements that brought progress or help to the people. The Semite slaves with an art impulse within them passed into the deserts, poor and pursued, seeing their pillar of fire; the masters waited in wealth, untouched by the flame of artistic passion and their nation still sits in the shadow of the tombs watching with uncomprehending eyes the achievements through the ages of the people they once despised. If by the Nile there lives, still latent though unexpressed, a talent for art that shall move Egypt to exalted emotions, then will a new glory arise that shall overshadow the pyramids and the Sphinx. The country of humanity embalmed waits in servitude till art shall make her free.

Greece never attained to full social consciousness; her caste spirit was as cruel as that of India. Yet the rising tides of art, flowing into the old Minoan age, making the city of almost forgotten Knossos rich in creations of pottery that the archeologist still rescues from the dust, bore her almost to a period of social conscience. That stream broadened as it met the Persian opposition and the people rose to self-defense. Idealism gave the brain that won the sea battle of Salamis and at that moment art sprang forward. Artists expressed themselves: Aischulos, Sophokles, Kratinos, Aristophanes, Pindar and Pheidias spoke a new exaltation to a joyous people. Sparta cared not for these things. She had no art impulses that were strong to save her and the rising civilization. She attacked the very soul of man; called in the Persian and struck down with the sword the hands that held the chisel and the pen. But for that crime new democracies and sciences would have been born where, coming centuries later, Paul of Tarsus found, not an aggressive civilization but a group of people "ever seeking to hear some new thing." Left free, the art that made the Athenians glorious would have done its perfect work in human

improvement and the accomplishments of Franklin and his friends in Philadelphia, more than two thousand years later, might have been anticipated on Mars Hill.

All histories tell the same tale of the unity of art with great impulses and of great impulses with exalted human actions. The redemption of France from the corrupt courts of her kings came from the art those courts and kings fostered. Voltaire, chuckling and grinning, was the product of a consciousness of the need of beauty which the creation of beauty had itself produced. In his essays and dramas, in the art of his time originated the lamp-post gallows, the guillotine and the crowded death-carts which preceded the achievement of higher governmental ideals with a new birth of freedom, justice and education. Everywhere the great statue walks a conqueror among men, overturning systems and theologies; the canvas that art has made sacred is the background for the fields whereon men die for the defense of righteousness. The garret may house the man who sets navies against navies; the poet singing of love and beauty shares in dictating the fate of financial domains.

Observe in England how Shakespeare put his ideal ladies and gentlemen upon the stage and was a part of a movement which changed the destinies of the English people! The great theater manager died when Oliver Cromwell, the brewer's boy, was seventeen; John Milton, later to be counted a fellow artist, was eight years old. Shakespeare began life amid a goodly company of creators of national ideals. Marlowe was born the same year, 1564. Bacon was three years old then, Ben Jonson came nine years later. Such men made the reign of Elizabeth noble with literature and great emotions. Their influence dominated English thought until some fifty years after the great queen went to her grave in 1603. These were the best years for the arts England had known. Oxford and Cambridge were founded, the coffee houses made a democracy for wit and wisdom wherefrom was born political common-sense. The excesses of royalty could no longer be excused as things necessary to be borne to please God. The strong fingers of the dead author of "Hamlet" reached in ghostly form from the world beyond and lifted an axe which fell upon the neck of a king. A thousand superstitions as to divine rights of rulers fled before that blow and the soul that spoke in Milton's democracy cast Satan down to more than unknown depths.

In our own country the success of literature, architecture and the kindred uplifting forces has preceded the success of the popular movements. The age before our Revolution was one of comparative economic ease and artistic appreciation. There poured into this country artistic men who joined our native artists in making a fine architecture, and the beginnings of all the great achievements we are carrying out. As our consciousness of the

beauty of harmony and of freedom grew, the war of 1776 came and with it a great emotional exaltation. The movement that developed when Shakespeare and Milton expressed themselves again acted in our new country: America is the second child of that age, of which regenerated England was the first-born. The Revolution killed or turned aside from art many who might have done much for the new nation, but as the nineteenth century began new artists were born. They came before the noon of the century to their full power. They dominated American thought, smiled away the corseted and sentimental art they found and gave to the nation a vital breadth. At once social unrest began to be serious. Economic causes acted and reacted, but the genius of Lincoln could not have worked effectively save in an atmosphere wherein lofty emotions were able to exist. In the increasing turmoil, ever increasing numbers of young people, trained and capable of appreciating the finer phases of life, set their hands to spiritual swords and spears. Men and women who loved beauty gave themselves to democracy; slavery ceased; the idea that this country is not worth keeping as a unit passed. The "sad sincerity" of the great creators of symbols gave the social reformers success.

Now the seekers of human betterment have still the lesson to learn. Great emotions are becoming common, yet they cry a barren gospel in the streets and a Shylock's philosophy in the halls. That inspiration which the Artist of Galilee employed to break the empires of the oppressors; that love of beauty, harmony and truth which is the life of art, of democracies and of mankind, is ignored by a perverse and ignorant multitude of well-intentioned agitators who must forever fail, until the truth is understood. Art needs nothing from popular movements save freedom of expression; popular movements need from art that sensitiveness to beauty and to all fine phases of human relations which art alone can give. The list of materials from which this people is to create its coming greatness, from which it is to rear its towers and adorn its life and order its industry, religion and government, includes the art impulse in all its fulness and subtle power.

No party rejecting art from its propaganda shall ever dominate America. If such a thing should come to pass, the end of civilization here would be in sight. Whatever great popular movements are fully in accord with the instinct for beauty will so embody justice as to be irresistible before the voters. There is a hunger for heavenly things in every heart; whether it be delighted with a plush-framed picture or with a statue that incarnates God. He who wishes America well must wish her art well; must support, encourage, sustain, inspire artistic expression, artistic thinking and the forms of joyousness and grandeur from which all nobility derives its power.

Owen R. Washburn